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ABSTRACT

In the United Kingdom, the term "outdoor management development" (OMD) is commonly used to describe courses using outdoor facilities to achieve the aims of management development. OMD courses claim to be able to train staff and managers from a variety of organizations. The received wisdom in OMD is that practice in the field has a sound theoretical basis and that it achieves the results it claims. To compare personal experiences with the received wisdom, 46 participants were interviewed and took part in focus group discussions several weeks after their attendance on OMD courses at Brathay Hall in the English Lake District. Participants were asked to make sense of the course and describe all aspects of the course that they noticed. Key findings were: (1) course aspects that participants noticed and commented on corresponded to received wisdom on the theoretical basis for OMD, matching the content of theories such as Kolb's learning cycle, the findings from empirical research, and much that has been written about experiential learning; (2) participants understood course objectives, identified outcomes that could be evaluated at several levels, and described links between learning on the course and the context of their working life; and (3) statements about course outcomes fell into the categories of personal learning, team learning, and general principles. (SV)

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Making Sense of Outdoor Management Development (OMD): Comparing Participants' views of OMD with the Received Wisdom

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Making Sense of Outdoor Management Development (OMD): Comparing Participants' views of OMD with the Received Wisdom

Phil Donnison

ABSTRACT.

This paper presents an account of qualitative research I have conducted into the use of the outdoors for management training and development in the English Lake District. The research compares course participants' personal experiences with the received wisdom on the use of the outdoors for corporate training. The results of the research are presented as a framework, firmly grounded in the accounts of participants, which integrates the popular view of Outdoor Management Development (OMD) with current practice in the UK.

INTRODUCTION.

In the UK, the term "Outdoor Management Development" (OMD) is commonly used to describe courses using outdoor facilities to achieve the aims of management development. OMD courses are purchased on the basis of their claims to be able to train and develop staff and managers from a variety of organisations. The received wisdom in OMD is that practice in the field has a sound theoretical basis and that it achieves the results it claims. However, there are two long-standing criticisms that are frequently levelled at OMD (Jones and Oswick, 1993):

- That there is little or no theoretical basis to underpin practices in the field of OMD.
- Although OMD course providers treat the outcomes they claim to achieve as 'proven fact', there is little evidence that this is the case.

Jones and Oswick (1993) suggest that the received wisdom in OMD is based on the beliefs and opinions of OMD course providers, not on the results of empirical research. During 1997 I conducted interviews with 46 participants, following their attendance on OMD courses at Brathay Hall in the English Lake District. Their personal experiences whilst attending an OMD course were compared with the received wisdom on OMD. This paper is a report of the research.

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ADOPTING A SUBJECTIVE METHODOLOGY.

In the UK, training is promoted as a means to an end. As a result, the majority of research into OMD seeks to 'prove' that training can produce the outcomes it claims. This approach examines the connections between the processes and practices used on OMD courses and their outcomes, to see if there is any cause and effect relationship. This has resulted in the majority of research into OMD adopting an impartial, objective approach and using quasi-experimental designs.

Research that takes this approach examines OMD training courses to identify which factors influence the outcomes of the course. These factors, and their effects, have properties that can be measured using quantitative methods. For example, quantitative methods may be used as part of an experimental approach that seeks to establish the effect of a training course on delegates and the magnitude of those effects. This would be compared to the effect of not attending the course to establish the measurable differences.

Researchers using quantitative methods assume that the effects of OMD courses and the factors that cause these effects can be measured. However, the events during and following an OMD course are open to different interpretations and translations by different individuals. Human beings do not just respond to 'external factors', but take an active part in constructing what the situation actually means to them. The way an individual perceives the effect of an OMD course and the causes of that effect may depend on their frame of reference.

In taking a subjective approach to the study of OMD courses, I am seeking to understand the situation from a participant's own point of view. If the reality of an OMD course is constructed and maintained by those who take part in it, research into it is only possible through close hand observation and involvement with participants. There are already examples of studies of OMD that have taken this approach. (Burleston and Grint, 1996)

Taking a subjective approach to this research involved my making a commitment to try to see the world through the eyes of the research subjects. This implies that the 'reality' of a situation depends on participants' perceptions. The 'reality' of an OMD course is not an external phenomenon that can be measured, but is socially constructed and given meaning by people.

USING QUALITATIVE METHODS.

In adopting a subjective approach, I was keen to ensure that the process of data gathering was not a mechanical one, in which I merely acted as a human tape recorder. From the start I sought to understand the sense participants make of their experiences on an OMD course and the meanings they give them. I tried not to spend time gathering facts and measuring properties of an external 'reality'. I assumed that the 'facts' were not passively waiting 'out there' to be gathered up.

Instead I asked participants to make sense of the course they had attended and to describe all the aspects of it they noticed. To make sure that they did not just respond to my questions, and answer questions on my areas of interest, I asked them to engage in a dialogue with the other participants from the OMD course that they had attended, using focus group discussions as the main vehicle for this.

The participants had attended OMD courses at Brathay Hall, an OMD provider in the English Lake District. Each course had explicitly stated objectives that are summarised below, in Table 1. Participants were interviewed several weeks after the course, when they had returned to work. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were analysed to identify similar meanings and categorise themes that started to occur amongst participants' comments.

Table 1. OMD Course Objectives

To develop an understanding of an effective approach to working as a team.
To develop the ability to work together, as a team, with colleagues who are attending the same course.
To understand the interpersonal skills needed to work as managers and supervisors.
To develop management skills in the areas of people management, teamwork and motivation.

My analysis of the transcriptions aimed to identify clusters and categories that were built around similar meaning. Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe this approach as a way to develop theories inductively from the phenomenon studied. Rather than testing hypotheses generated from theories put forward prior to the investigation, this approach starts with descriptive data, in my case the transcripts, and builds a theory from the ground up. The transcripts I had gathered from the focus group interviews were subjected to increasing levels of conceptualisation that allowed the development of an account of OMD that came from participant's perceptions. This ultimately led to the development of a classification of OMD based on participants' comments.

What follows are the findings from the analysis of these interviews.

FINDING 1: THE THEORETICAL BASIS FOR OMD.

The received wisdom, as expressed by many writers on OMD, is that OMD courses are a form of training which adopt a specific approach to achieving their objectives. Experiential learning is often put forward as the main theory of learning that underpins their approach. This is widely presented as an approach that allows participants to learn in a practical way. Instead of just transmitting knowledge and information, participants are actively involved in activities and exercises that are designed to promote practical learning that is applicable to their workplace. As well as the cognitive (thinking) domain, experiential approaches emphasise what participants can do (practical skills) and how they feel, might have an effect on what they do (the affective domain).

In reporting the effects of their attendance on courses, delegates confirmed that they saw the OMD course as a form of training course designed to achieve specific objectives. In their comments, they also reflected the emphasis on personal and practical skills (quotations from participants are in italics):

"I can see the fundamental things that I can now apply at work in my job as regional manager."

Whilst another delegate, on a course aimed to develop teamwork, drew attention to how he/she felt as a result of the course:

"I think it has made a tremendous difference to the way we feel about each other. We're all rooting for one another. Because of the training we are a very strong team."

A body of empirical research (for example; Kirk, 1986; Newell and Ibbetson, 1996; Irvine and Wilson 1994; Dainty and Lucas 1992) describes some of the identifying features of OMD courses. For example, OMD courses contain a degree of physical involvement, usually activities or exercises that place participants in a novel situation. These activities are followed by reviews, during which behaviour may be discussed, feedback exchanged and feelings disclosed. This process, which typically follows the Kolb learning cycle (Kolb, 1974), appears to be recognisable to participants. They accurately described the experiential cycle and the way it enabled them to transfer their learning from exercises and activities on the course to other situations:

"After each task we sat down, otherwise it would have been one long holiday, we sat down and said what we did right and wrong. That's how we learnt. You could apply those lessons to anything that you do. Even though they were outdoor activities you can apply them to any team exercise"

The participants also saw the courses as a safe environment which gave them an opportunity to try out new approaches and to experiment with situations which they found challenging. This process was clearly described by one of the delegates:

"We discussed a lot of things quite openly there and everyone said what they were or were not comfortable with, and we all tended to pick up on what people weren't comfortable with and then encourage them to have a go. It worked quite well"

Listed below, in Table 2, are the main processes which participants identified as underpinning the courses they attended.

Table 2 – Participant's perceptions of OMD course processes.

Experiential Learning
They found the involvement in experiential learning more effective than being taught in a more didactic style of training, which they referred to as 'classroom style'.

Kolb's Learning Cycle
Participants viewed the exercises and activities they took part in and the reviews which followed the exercises as a useful way to learn. They referred specifically to the stages of Kolb's learning cycle.

Facing Challenges
They actively pursued the opportunity to learn by identifying things they were not comfortable with and trying them out on the course, which they considered to be a safe environment.

Experimentation
The opportunity to experiment, without the fear of repercussions if things went wrong was particularly appreciated.

Feedback
They also identified feedback from each other and from questionnaires as providing them with significant learning.

Insights
Several participants were able to identify specific insights they had during individual exercises.

FINDING 2: THE OUTCOMES OF OMD COURSES.

Participants commented on various aspects of the OMD courses. Their comments roughly correspond to Kirkpatrick's four levels of evaluation (1959). Kirkpatrick proposed that training could be evaluated in terms of delegates' reactions to the training, the learning they individually gained from it, the effect it had on their behaviour at work and, ultimately, the effect it had on the result of their work performance.

There were many comments which correspond to Kirkpatrick's first level, including the parts of the training which were enjoyable and satisfying as well as the parts which were more challenging and even threatening. However, these comments were on how participants felt about the experience. They gave no indication whether the objectives stated in Table 1 had been achieved.

Participants' comments were not limited to their reactions to the course. At the very foundation of OMD is the question; 'does the learning that occurs on the course transfer to a participant's "real" life?' In order for the aims of the course to be achieved participants need to see the course as relevant to their workplace environment (Kirk, 1986). One delegate's comment confirmed that she saw the course as relevant to her work and the lessons transferred to the workplace:

"In your job, every day you face things that you haven't got a clue what to do and you have to go out and fight for yourself or rely on everybody to help you and it is exactly how it was during the course, it's the same concept. If you can't do something you need to rely on other people."

Many of the comments can be mapped onto Kirkpatrick's three levels of evaluation of learning, behaviour and results. For instance:

"The course has helped me realise what sort of person I am, what I like and what I enjoy, where my challenges are and where I'm not happy."

"It is the way I work with my team that has changed. I look more for trying to help the people I'm with and see what they want rather than just throwing work at them."

"We won the league last month and that's because we were a team that's pulling together…we are all really pulling together"

The participants in this study identified that the OMD courses produced a variety of effects and outcomes that agreed with the stated aims of the course. The key categories of outcomes they mentioned are listed below, in Table 3:

Table 3. Participants' perceptions of the course outcomes.

Increased self-awareness and understanding of their effect on other people.
Understanding of aspects of their own and other peoples' personalities.
How they felt about themselves, for instance their level of self-confidence.
Better knowledge and understanding of members of the same team.
Increased feelings of support and encouragement between team members.
General principles, such as best practice when managing others or working as part of a team.

FINDING 3: PATTERNS OF COURSE OUTCOMES.

Throughout the statements made by participants about their learning and about the achievement of the course outcomes, I noticed that their comments tended to fall into three separate headings:

a) Personal learning, picked up by an individual, relative to the role they occupy as a job in the workplace and relative to their colleagues, who may or may not be part of a team, back at work.

b) Team learning, picked up by all members of the group or team of people with whom they attended the OMD course. This may be the team they attended the course with, but it could also be all participants on a course, who may be from a variety of organisations.

c) General principles which were learnt by individuals during the course. These general principles may be new information or knowledge, which participants found particularly memorable and which gave them useful insights.

These three headings form three separate sub-divisions under which many comments can be clearly placed. However, many comments could be placed in two, or three, of the headings.

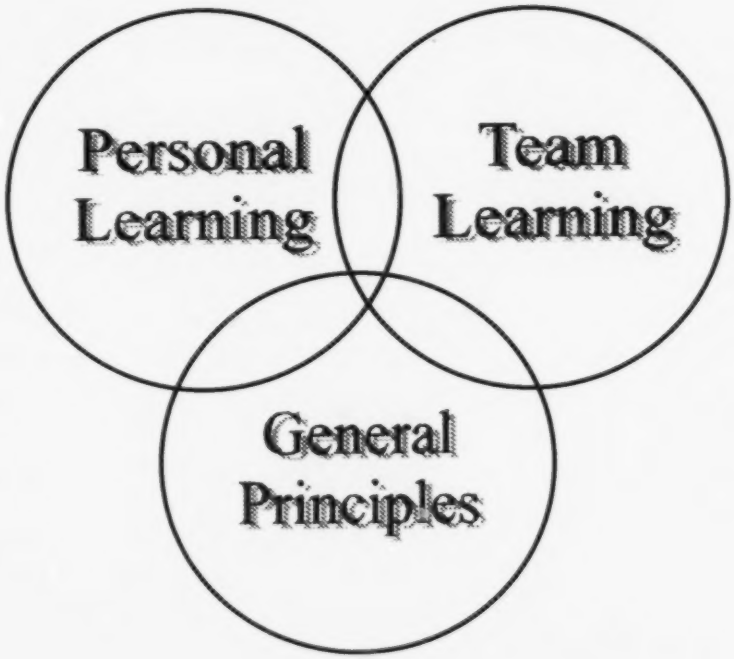
For instance, all the quotations above can be identified as referring to learning that is for an individual which they can take back to work and apply for themselves, and learning that is only relevant to the group of people who attended the course as a team. Participants also mentioned new knowledge and information they had gained which they often expressed as newly found insights.

"... what I thought of as organising is in fact management. I never twigged that I was managing. I was, during the day, in my job, and organising the rest of the time in voluntary things. That was quite an eye opener."

There are overlaps between these three headings. Some statements can be identified with two or more of the categories. For instance, some participants described new knowledge and information which was of interest to them in isolation, whilst others described these general principles which were relevant and had practical implications for team they attended the course with.

The three main categories of learning from OMD courses, together with the possible overlaps between them, are illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4: Patterns of Course Outcomes



CONCLUSIONS.

There were three key findings from this research:

Finding 1: Participants from OMD courses noticed and commented on events during the course which correspond to much of the received wisdom on the theoretical basis for OMD. The descriptions of processes they observed on the course match the content of theories such as Kolb's learning cycle, the findings from empirical research and much that has been written about experiential learning.

Finding 2: Participants comments indicated that they understood the training objectives the OMD courses were trying to achieve. They identified outcomes that could be evaluated at several levels that correspond to Kirkpatrick's four levels of evaluation. They also described the links that indicated that learning which took place on the course transferred back to the context of their working life.

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Finding 3: The statements about course outcomes made by participants fall into three separate categories; personal learning, team learning and general principles, although some statements can be identified with two or more of the categories.

The conclusions that were reached show that participants' perceptions correspond to the received wisdom on the theoretical basis for OMD and the possible outcomes OMD courses can achieve. Participants had not been briefed on the theories that lay behind the approach the courses took, although they were aware of the outcomes they were striving to achieve.

These findings are from a qualitative study. As such this study follows the tradition of qualitative research and describes the understanding participants have of OMD. It does not seek to measure the effects of the OMD course or to establish the causes that are related to these effects. The conclusions are based on participant's perceptions.

These conclusions address the two criticisms frequently levelled at OMD and confirm much of the received wisdom. Participants confirm that OMD courses do have a theoretical basis and can achieve the outcomes they lay claim to.

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